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 LE THÉÂTRE DES MATIÈRES
 

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*Jean-Claude Biette is still of the generation that had the moral sense, so a sense of the aesthetic. And believe me, said Renoir, that's a race that is seems to be disappearing.*

Jean-Marie Straub

Jean-Claude Biette is a case: the director of a small number of memorable, rarely seen, films, never abandoning writing about cinema at the same time as doing it, loving to play with ideas and words (it was he who came up with the title of the magazine *Trafic*<sup>1</sup>), an occasional actor (*Othon, Mange ta soupe*), a dilettante thoroughly obsessed by his passion, he assuredly remained, according to Jean-Claude Guiguet's description, 'the least well known of important French filmmakers'. He made his first feature film, *Le Théâtre des matières*, in 1977, the point of departure for a radically singular oeuvre, marked by finely esoteric humour, a joyous reflection on the relations between cinema and the other arts as well as on language, with titles such as *Le Complexe de Toulon*, *The Carpathian Mushroom*, and *Saltimbank*.

*His oeuvre represents the crossed heritage of the great craftsmen of Hollywood B films (his fathers) and a cinematographic modernity that impregnated his training years (his peers). From the former, he drew a sense of economy that, seizing upon a dearth of means as an occasion for concentrating his expression, defined an aesthetic of necessity (making the most with the least) and secrecy (suggesting rather than showing). The purity of the 1:1.37 frame refers to the golden section and frontal compositions of classic cinema. Above all, Biette films conversations and movements, those minimal actions of daily life that suffice to open onto the world and its stories, relegating any surplus to the powers of the invisible. At the heart of his shots moves a small (evolutional) troupe of actors - Paulette and Jean-Christophe Bouvet, Sonia Saviange, Howard Vernon, Tonie Marshall, Thomas Badek, Jeanne Balibar – to whose singularity he gives room to manoeuvre and his full attention. (...)*

*The Biettian narrative is thus larded with turns and, circulating on the threshold of a story that never comes, it is precisely through the unexpected - that which suddenly appears at the corner of the street or in the inner room of a restaurant - that he loses us and finds us again, delights us and holds us spellbound. The stage play in preparation is one of his recurrent motifs, and the scene of a dark cave that seems to hold the secret of relations between beings, an icy home at the contact of which one attains another dimension of life (*Le Théâtre des matières*, *Le Complexe de Toulon*, *The Carpathian Mushroom* and *Saltimbank*).*

Mathieu Macheret, 'La Farandole équivoque', La Cinémathèque française programme, June 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Founded in 1991 by Biette and Serge Daney, the film magazine's title is also a wink at the Jacques Tati film.

# THE AGITATORS

Programming  
Thanks to Henri Langlois

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## Le Théâtre des matières

France, 1977 – 77 minutes

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**Direction, script and dialogues:** Jean-Claude Biette

**Music:** Delibes, Beethoven, Bizet

**Assistant director:** Gérard Frot-Coutaz

**Production:** Diagonale et Stephan films

**Cast:** Sonia Saviange, Howard Vernon, Philippe Chemin, Martine Simonet, Jean Christophe Bouvet, Brigitte Jacques, Costa Commène, Serge Casado, Liza Braconnier, Marcel Gassouk, Benoît Jacquot, Guy Gilles, Jean-Claude Guiguet, Noël Simsolo

Dorothee works in a travel agency and dreams of another world: the theatre. After an impromptu faint, she is noticed by Hermann, the director of The Théâtre des Matières, who paints in glowing colours the role of Catherine de Médicis in Schiller's *Marie Stuart*. Dorothee begins rehearsing relentlessly.

***Le Théâtre des matières* was restored digitally from the original image and sound negative by the Digimage laboratory in 2013.**

